

Rep. Henry A. Waxman  
National Jewish Democratic Council  
May 21, 2014

Thank you to event chairs Martin Frost and Barbara Goldberg Goldman. And, thank you to host committee members Mel Levine, Ann Lewis, Abbe Lowell, and Greg and Marti Rosenbaum.

This feels like a homecoming for me. I am surrounded by so many dear friends -- some of whom I've known for decades. I am extremely proud of the work NJDC does so it is a tremendous honor to receive the first ever Henry A. Waxman Award for (???)

A few short weeks ago, at Passover, we sat down to our seders and relived what for me is a core value of Judaism -- No one is marginalized at the seder. It is a theme repeated throughout the Haggadah:

- Matzah is referred to as the poor man's bread, not only because it is meager but also because no one is too poor to partake in the Afikomen, the taste of freedom.
- None of the four sons is deemed too smart, or rebellious, disinterested or simply uninformed. Everyone is a stakeholder in the Exodus from Egypt.

Judaism believes in the equality of opportunity because every man and woman is created in God's image. And Judaism espouses the importance of a communal safety net to make sure no one is left behind.

It is a theme that appears often in the Torah and in Jewish law.

- We are commanded to reach out to the widow, the orphan and the stranger.
- We are told to leave the remnants of the harvest for the needy to collect.
- We are taught to remove obstacles in the path of the blind.
- In our shops, we keep honest weights and measures.
- At the height of the celebration of Purim we are to give gifts to the poor.
- And at the depths of the fast of Yom Kippur we hear a haftarah from the book of Isaiah that reproaches us not to think that fasting alone is sufficient unless we free the oppressed, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked.

I saw these values in my own home.

My family lived above a grocery store that my father Lou owned in the Watts neighborhood. When people hit hard times he would let them buy on credit. Well, he called it credit, but it amounted to dignity for fathers and mothers trying to put food on the table.

My Uncle Al ran a newspaper, the *LA Reporter* – often called the *Waxman Reporter* - that featured stories about corporate corruption. It ingrained in me the importance of accountability and transparency to ensure that consumers have confidence in the products they buy and that workers are assured a fair playing field, safety, and job security.

I was raised by New Deal Democrats who felt that government had a role in ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to succeed and that a safety net should be available to make sure that no one is marginalized because of age or disability.

What drew me to politics were the esteem I felt for public service and my commitment to Jewish values like the concept in the Haggadah of helping all people realize their full potential.

While I do not believe that the role of government is to guarantee the equality of results, I sincerely believe that government has a profound role to play in giving all individuals an equal opportunity to succeed.

What I believe to be my greatest legislative accomplishments revolve around this principle. And I am very proud to have built a strong record of progressive legislation in the environment, health care, and consumer protection.

In Congress, I have championed legislation – that is now law -- to:

- Limit toxic air emissions, so that we can all breathe cleaner air.
- Expand Medicaid coverage for the poor and the elderly.

- Ban smoking on airplanes ...and place tobacco where it belongs, under the strict supervision of the Food and Drug Administration.
- Fund the first government-sponsored HIV/AIDS research.
- Lower drug prices through generic alternatives and foster the development of new drugs to treat rare diseases.
- Keep food free of pesticides, and label it with nutritional information so you know what you are eating.
- Establish federal standards for nursing homes to protect the elderly from abuse and neglect.
- Establish stronger standards to keep our water safe to drink.
- Enact – at long last – legislation that gives every American access to quality, affordable health care.

When I first came to Congress almost forty years ago, I had two goals – universal health care and peace in the Middle East. We achieved one, but I will leave at the end of the year pained knowing that we have made so little progress on peace for our ally Israel.

Unfortunately, I have had to add another unfulfilled goal to my list – legislation to address the impacts of climate change. When I was chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee in 2009, we were able to pass the Waxman-Markey bill, which would have curbed the heat-trapping gases scientists have linked to climate change, but the Senate couldn't find sixty votes to pass even the most meager climate change measure.

One thing I have learned in my congressional service is that you must have persistence and you must seize every opportunity to make progress wherever you can. At the famous 1994 hearing, the nation's tobacco company CEOs testified before the Health and Environment Subcommittee I chaired that nicotine was not addictive and that tobacco companies did not target their advertising to kids. They were left without a shred credibility. But it wasn't until 2009, after years of struggle, that we were finally able to enact the Tobacco Control Act 2009 granting FDA the explicit authority to regulate the manufacturing, marketing, and distribution of tobacco products.

Our Jewish values teach us to embrace opportunities every day and to look for ways to engage in tzedakah and Tikkun Olam. These values have been an inspiration for my work in Congress, and I am grateful every day that I have been given the privilege to serve. And when I leave at the end of the year, I will find new opportunities to contribute to make our country a stronger, healthier fairer place to live.

Thank you again for the great honor you have bestowed on me, and for your friendship, which I will always treasure.